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Price deregulation raises medicine costs by 32pc

• Officials concerned by soaring prices • Senate body to question industry on steep hikes

By Imran Ayub

KARACHI: Prices of more than a hundred commonly used medicines have increased by an average of 32 per cent since February last year, after the caretaker government lifted price controls under its deregulation policy, prompting concern among officials and calls for the pharmaceutical industry to explain the steep hikes, according to officials and industry sources.

The steep rise has not only fuelled public anger but also caught the authorities off guard, as they had expected that price deregulation would promote competition and eventually bring down costs for consumers. However, the outcome appears to be quite the opposite.The surge in medicine prices came to light through recent findings of an ongoing national survey ordered by the prime minister, following complaints from citizens, hospitals, and provincial health departments about soaring drug costs.

Chairman of the Senate Standing Committee on National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination, Senator Amir Waliuddin Chishti, told *Dawn* that officials of the federal health ministry and the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan (DRAP) had informed the committee that an overall 32pc increase in medicine prices had been observed since the caretaker government deregulated non-essential medicines in February 2024.

He added that in some cases, prices had risen by as much as 100pc, while an increase of around 50pc was recorded in several others.

Senator Chishti said the purpose of deregulation was to boost competition, attract investment and increase exports, not to burden consumers.

Industry to face questions

He noted that a 32pc overall rise in medicine prices within two years warranted corrective action.

"We have decided to seek justification from the industry in all cases where medicine prices have increased by 50pc or more," Senator Chishti added.

"We expect to meet industry representatives next month, and if we detect any element of cartelisation by the pharmaceutical sector, we will ask the Competition Commission of Pakistan to look into the matter."

He said the committee did not want the pharmaceutical industry to suffer and wanted it to grow, but not at the expense of patients, who were already struggling due to the prevailing economic situation.

He continued that the committee was expecting recommendations from the prime minister on the pricing of non-essential medicines.

Before deregulation, pharmaceutical companies were allowed to increase prices by up to 7pc annually in line with the Consumer Price Index under the previous pricing system.

Officials pointed out that, under this formula, prices would have risen by about 14pc over two years, far lower than the 32pc surge witnessed after deregulation.

Claims rejected

The Pakistan Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association (PPMA), however, rejected claims of an excessive price increase. It argued that the survey reflected an average rise of about 15pc and that, if the roughly 3pc linked to the launch of new products and strengths is excluded, the actual two-year increase stood at around 12pc.

PPMA's Tauqeerul Haq said the deregulation was a timely move that prevented the collapse of the pharmaceutical industry amid soaring input costs, currency depreciation, inflation, rising energy and labour costs, and heavy taxation over the years.

"The policy helped restart production of many previously unavailable medicines, improved their availability, and curbed the circulation of counterfeit drugs during shortages," he added.

The pharmaceutical industry argues that deregulation was necessary as the previous controlled pricing system made production unsustainable. Even under the old system, prices could not be raised without the federal cabinet's approval. "Whenever a proposal to raise drug prices was presented, the cabinet would usually reject it due to political pressure," said an industry representative. "Thus, deregulation was only possible during the caretaker government's tenure."

While deregulation has led to an increase in medicine prices, it has had a positive impact by resolving shortages of medicines at the retail level.

Abdul Samad Budhani, chairman of the Pakistan Chemists and Druggists Association, said the deregulation of medicine prices ensured abundant availability of medicines, ending persistent shortages.

He described deregulation as a necessary step to move away from centralised pricing controls that had hindered the sector's ability to respond to rising production costs.

However, Mr Budhani noted that challenges remain for essential drugs classified as "hardship cases".

"The real need for relief was in essential drugs, but their prices were not approved, while non-essential drugs received pricing approvals," he said, adding that bureaucratic delays had contributed to shortages of some vital medicines.

Seven judges on the shortlist for Federal Constitutional Court

• Constitutional Bench head Justice Aminuddin Khan among leading candidates for top slot
• Federal court will have exclusive jurisdiction over constitutional matters

By Malik Asad

ISLAMABAD: With the 27th Constitutional Amendment progressing smoothly through parliament, the government has begun restructuring the superior judiciary, shortlisting seven judges for appointment to the proposed Federal Constitutional Court (FCC) — an institution designed to deal with constitutional interpretation and intergovernmental disputes.

Official sources said the government has initiated consultations on the composition of the new court, and Justice Aminuddin Khan, who presently heads the Supreme Court's Constitutional Bench, is being considered for appointment as the chief justice of the FCC.

The names of Justice Syed Hasan Azhar Rizvi, Justice Musarrat Hilali, Justice Aamer Farooq, and Justice Ali Baqar Najafi from the Supreme Court, along with Justice K.K. Agha of the Sindh High Court and Justice Rozi Khan Barrech, the incumbent chief justice of the Balochistan High Court, are also being discussed for inclusion in the initial composition of the new court.

Sources said that the initial strength of the FCC would be determined through a Presidential Order, while any subsequent increase in the number of judges would require an Act of Parliament.

Officials at the law ministry confirmed that the president, on the prime minister's advice, will appoint judges to the new court under the proposed amendment.

The FCC proposal has been revived in the 27th Constitutional Amendment Bill to streamline the Supreme Court's jurisdiction and improve efficiency in constitutional adjudication.

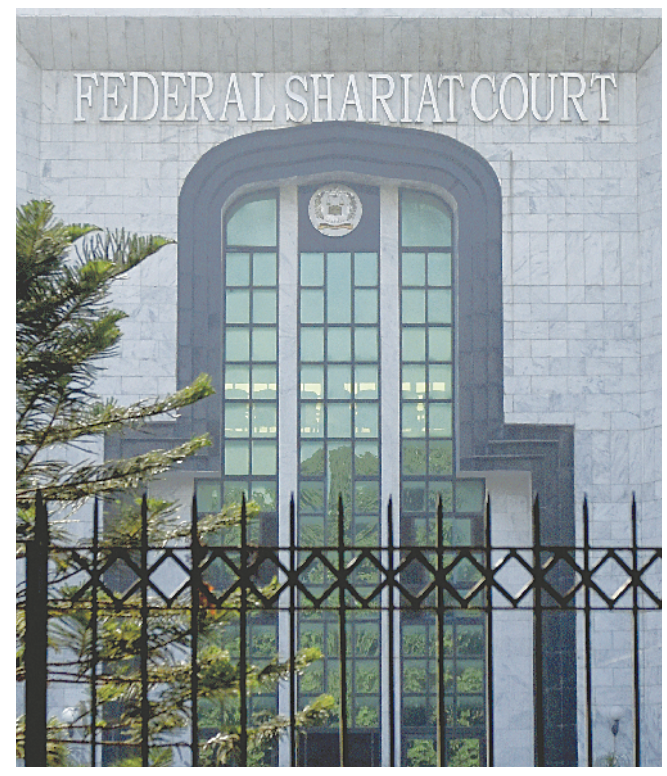
The government believes this initiative will ease the SC's workload, speed up constitutional rulings, and enhance judicial independence and credibility.

The idea of a separate constitutional court was first introduced in the 2006 Charter of Democracy signed by the PPP and PML-N. The CoD proposed a specialised court for constitutional matters to let the SC focus on final appeals. The idea reappeared in the 26th Amendment draft but was dropped due to opposition from JUI-F and others.

The proposal sets the Constitutional Court judges' retirement age at 68, three years beyond the Supreme Court's 65, to ensure continuity and attract experienced jurists.

The new court will be housed in the Federal Shariat Court building in Islamabad, while the Federal Shariat Court moves to the Islamabad High Court. This will symbolically and administratively separate the FCC from the Supreme Court and other superior courts.

The FCC will have exclusive jurisdiction over constitutional interpretation, intergovernmental disputes between the federation and provinces, and matters arising directly from constitutional provisions. It will also be empowered to examine the legality of presidential orders, constitutional amendments, and questions referred to it by the president or the Parliament.



THE Federal Shariat Court, located opposite the Supreme Court building, will house the new FCC.—Tanveer Shahzad/White Star

Judges' profiles

Justice Aminuddin Khan, the likely nominee for chief justice of the FCC, was born in Multan in 1960. A second-generation lawyer, he earned his LL.B from University Law College, Multan, in 1984 and began practice under his father, Khan Sadiq Muhammad Ahsan.

He became an advocate of the LHC in 1987 and of the Supreme Court in 2001, later rising to the LHC bench in 2011 and the SC in 2019. He has authored several landmark judgements in civil and constitutional law.

Justice Syed Hasan Azhar Rizvi, born in Karachi in 1962, began practicing law in 1988 and was elevated to the SC in 2023. He is known for his integrity and expertise in constitutional and administrative law.

Justice Musarrat Hilali, the first woman chief justice of the Peshawar High Court, was elevated to the SC in 2023. She has a distinguished legal career and has served as Additional Advocate General of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Federal Ombudsman for Protection against Harassment of Women.

Justice Aamer Farooq, former IHC chief justice, was elevated to the SC in February 2025. Educated in London and at Lincoln's Inn, he specialises in constitutional and commercial law.

Justice Ali Baqar Najafi of the LHC has vast experience in civil, criminal, and constitutional law. He has decided over 37,000 cases and led key inquiries, including the 2014 Model Town investigation.

Justice Rozi Khan Barrech, chief justice of the Balochistan High Court, joined the judiciary in 1998, was elevated to the High Court in 2019, and became chief justice in July 2025.

Justice K.K. Agha of the Sindh High Court has an extensive international career, having served as prosecutor at the UN tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and as senior counsel at the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

Syrian president arrives in US after sanctions lifted

Sharaa due to meet Trump at White House today

WASHINGTON: President Ahmed al-Sharaa of Syria arrived in the United States on Saturday for a landmark official visit, his country's state news agency reported, a day after Washington removed him from a terrorism blacklist.

Sharaa, whose rebel forces ousted longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad late last year, is due to meet US President Donald Trump at the White House on Monday (today).

It's the first such visit by a Syrian president since the country's independence in 1946, according to analysts.

The interim leader met Trump for the first time in Riyadh during the US president's regional tour in May.

Washington's envoy to Syria, Tom Barrack, said earlier this month that Sharaa would "hopefully" sign an agreement to join the international US-led alliance against the self-styled Islamic State (IS) group.

The United States plans to establish a military base near Damascus "to coordinate humanitarian aid and observe developments between Syria and Israel", a diplomatic source in Syria told AFP.

The State Department's decision on Friday to remove Sharaa from the blacklist was widely expected.

State Department spokesman Tommy Pigott said Sharaa's government had been meeting US demands, including on working to find missing Americans and on eliminating any remaining chemical weapons.

"These actions are being taken in recognition of the progress demonstrated by the Syrian leadership after the departure of Bashar al-Assad and more than 50 years of repression under the Assad regime," Pigott said.

The spokesman added that the US delisting would promote "regional security and stability as well as an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process".

The Syrian interior ministry announced on Saturday that it had carried out 61 raids and made 71 arrests in a "proactive campaign to neutralise the threat" of IS, according to the official SANA news agency.

It said the raids targeted locations where IS sleeper cells remain, including Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Damascus.

After his arrival, Sharaa met with representatives from Syrian organisations in Washington, according to his country's official media.

The Syrian foreign minister posted a social media video, filmed before Sharaa's departure, of him playing basketball with CENTCOM commander Brad Cooper and Kevin Lambert, the head of the international anti-IS operation in Iraq, alongside the caption "work hard, play harder".

Transformation

Sharaa's Washington trip comes after his landmark visit to the United Nations in September — his first time on US soil — where he became the first Syrian president in decades to address the UN General Assembly in New York.

On Thursday, Washington led a vote by the Security Council to remove UN sanctions against him.

Formerly affiliated with Al-Qaeda, Sharaa's group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), was delisted as a terrorist group by Washington as recently as July.

Since taking power, Syria's new leaders have sought to break from their violent past and present a moderate image more tolerable to ordinary Syrians and foreign powers.

The White House visit "is further testament to the US commitment to the new Syria and a hugely symbolic moment for the country's new leader, who thus marks another step in his astonishing transformation from militant leader to global statesman", International Crisis Group US programme director Michael Hanna said.

Sharaa is expected to seek funds for Syria, which faces significant challenges in rebuilding after 13 years of civil war.

In October, the World Bank put a "conservative best estimate" of the cost of rebuilding Syria at $216 billion.—AFP

US visa seekers with health issues may face rejection

People with conditions like diabetes or obesity seen as 'burden on US resources'

VISAS of foreigners seeking residence in the US will face the possibility of rejection if the applicants have certain medical conditions, including diabetes or obesity, according to US-based news outlet *KFF Health News*.

Citing a new directive from the Trump administration, the publication reported this on Thursday.

According to the outlet, this new directive was outlined in a cable issued by the US State Department to embassy and consular officials.

It "directs visa officers to deem applicants ineligible to enter the US for several new reasons, including age or the likelihood they might rely on public benefits", *KFF* reported.

"The guidance says that such people could become a 'public charge' — a potential drain on US resources — because of their health issues or age," the report said.

"You must consider an applicant's health," the cable read, according to *KFF*. It added: "Certain medical conditions — including, but not limited to, cardiovascular diseases, respiratory diseases, cancers, diabetes, metabolic diseases, neurological diseases, and mental health conditions — can require hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of care."

According to *KFF*, the cable also encouraged visa officers to consider conditions like obesity — which it noted could cause asthma, sleep apnea and high blood pressure — while assessing whether an immigrant could become a public charge and should therefore be denied entry into the US.

"All of these can require expensive, long-term care," the cable read, additionally directing visa officers to determine if applicants had the means to pay for medical treatment without financial assistance from the US government.

KFF reported that the instruction also directed visa officers to consider the health of the applicant's family members, including children or older parents.

Tommy Pigott, the US State Department's principal deputy spokesperson, also said in a statement: "It's no secret the Trump administration is putting the interests of the American people first. This includes enforcing policies that ensure our immigration system is not a burden on the American taxpayer."

Separately, the official told reporters that the decision to issue a visa had always been at the discretion of an officer.

Officers are not being instructed to reject an applicant because they have a certain medical condition, but to consider the "overall impact" if someone would be unlikely to be able to pay for their own medical care, they clarified.

"It's addressed on an individual, case-by-case basis," the official added.—Monitoring Desk

Israel rules out Turkish troops in Gaza multinational force

Trump's plan calls for an international force gradually taking over security of Gaza from Israel

JERUSALEM: An Israeli government spokesperson said on Sunday that Turkish soldiers would not be deployed to Gaza as part of a multinational force that is meant to take over from the Israeli military.

"There will be no Turkish boots on the ground," spokesperson Shosh Bedrosian told reporters in response to a question.

US President Donald Trump's plan to end the two-year war calls for a temporary International Stabilisation Force to gradually take over security of Gaza from the Israeli military.

DISPLACED Palestinians chase after trucks carrying food supplies near Deir al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip.—AFP

The force has yet to be established and many countries are calling for it to have a mandate from the UN Security Council.

Asked about Israel's objections to Turkish forces in Gaza, US Ambassador to Turkey Tom Barrack said at a Manama security conference earlier this month that Turkey would participate.

Vice President JD Vance last month said there would be a "constructive role" for Ankara to play but that Washington wouldn't force anything on Israel when it came to foreign troops "on their soil".

Israel receives remains of officer killed in 2014

Israel said it had received on Sunday the remains of a prisoner, which Hamas says belong to Israeli officer Hadar Goldin who was killed in the 2014 Gaza war.

"After the identification process was completed... IDF (Israeli military) representatives informed the family of the fallen hostage Lieutenant Hadar Goldin that their loved one has been returned to Israel and his identification has been finalised," the prime minister's office said.

Israel has received, via the Red Cross, the coffin of a fallen prisoner that was transferred to IDF and Shin Bet personnel inside the Gaza Strip, the Israeli prime minister's office said.

The Ezzedine Al-Qassam Brigade, said earlier it had found Goldin's remains in a tunnel in Rafah the day before.

Goldin's body has been in Gaza since his death in 2014.

Israeli media reported on Saturday that Israel had allowed Hamas and Red Cross personnel to search in an area under Israeli control in Rafah to locate Goldin's remains.

Another Israeli soldier, Oron Shaul, was also killed in the six-week war in 2014.

His body was recovered earlier this year during the latest all-out war on October 7, 2023.

Goldin, 23, was part of an Israeli unit tasked with locating and destroying Hamas tunnels when he was killed on August 1, 2014, just hours after a 72-hour humanitarian ceasefire took effect.

The army alleged Hamas fighters ambushed his team, killing him and seizing his body.

Israel had listed Goldin among the deceased Israeli prisoners whose remains it seeks to repatriate under the ongoing US-brokered ceasefire deal to end the latest Gaza war.

Goldin's father said on Sunday that true victory in the current war would only be achieved when all prisoners were brought home.

"What this war has proven is that when we fight for our soldiers, we succeed. Victory means bringing home the hostages and bringing home our soldiers to Israel," Simcha Goldin said in a statement.

At the start of the truce, Hamas was holding 20 living prisoners and the bodies of28 deceased prisoners.

It has since released all the living Israeli prisoners and returned 23 remains of the deceased in line with the ceasefire terms.

In exchange, Israel has released nearly 2,000 Palestinian that had been in its custody and returned bodies of hundreds of Hamas fighters killed in Gaza.—Agencies

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